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ABSTRACT

The Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) method was originally designed for face-to-face classrooms in 1976 by D. Joseph Clark to obtain formative feedback from students and help improve course quality and teacher effectiveness. In the SGIF method, a facilitator meets with students, gathers feedback on an instructor's performance, and reviews these students' comments, privately, with the instructor. This document provides a detailed set of guidelines for instructors and facilitators who wish to implement the SGIF method for audioconference courses. The method consists of five steps: (1) preparation; (2) conducting the audioconference SGIF session; (3) facilitator/instructor meetings to discuss student feedback; (4) instructor acknowledgement of feedback; and (5) follow-up meeting between facilitator and instructor. The benefits of SGIF, compared with questionnaire use, are discussed, and experience necessary to facilitators and instructors are described. A sample audioconference orientation questionnaire and SGIF form are appended. Contains 14 references. (EMH)

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ED 420 347

Using
SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTIONAL FEEDBACK (SGIF)
As a formative feedback strategy for audioconference courses

Practical guidelines for audioconference instructors and facilitators

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[redacted] (April 1995)

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Forward

Formal methods for obtaining formative feedback during audioconference courses are usually limited to mid-course questionnaires (Burge & Roberts, 1993, p. 96-97), periodic mail-in responses (Willis, 1993, pp 109-110), or a combination of both methods. This guide was prepared so that Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) could be introduced as a practical and productive alternative for obtaining formative feedback from students during an audioconference course.

The foundation for this package is a similar guide, one prepared specifically for conducting SGIF sessions in face-to-face classrooms: *Using Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) as an Alternative to Mid-Course Questionnaires: Practical Guidelines for Instructors and Facilitators* (Robinson, 1995).

I believe that the small group process for obtaining feedback is ideally suited to the audioconference environment. As such, I hope that audioconference instructors and facilitators find this package to contain a thorough set of guidelines and instructions for obtaining formative feedback from adult learners.

Kerry Robinson, 1995

Introduction

The Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF)[1] method was originally designed for face-to-face classrooms in 1976 by D. Joseph Clark (Clark, 1982, p.2). The purpose of the SGIF method is to obtain formative feedback from students so that the instructor can improve the course and his or her ability to facilitate adult learning. Briefly described, the SGIF method involves an instructor arranging the services of a facilitator, who in turn meets with the instructor's students in an effort to gather feedback on the instructor's performance and the course in general. The facilitator then meets privately with the instructor to review the feedback received from the students. One reason for the appeal of the SGIF method in the traditional classroom is related to students' frustrations with repeatedly filling out the same mid-course and end-of-course questionnaires for each instructor (Abbott, Wulff, Nyquist, Ropp, & Hess, 1990, p. 201). It is not surprising, then, that research has shown the classroom SGIF method to be an effective alternative to mid-course questionnaires (Newby, Sherman, & Coffman, 1991).

Purpose

The purpose of this package is to provide a detailed set of guidelines for those persons interested in facilitating SGIF sessions for audioconference courses. This package also provides a list of benefits and expected outcomes for audioconference instructors wishing to receive feedback through the SGIF process.

Though literature on SGIF in the traditional classroom stresses that facilitators must be "trained" prior to conducting SGIF sessions (Clark, 1982, p. 4; Clark & Redmond, 1982, p. 1; Weimer, 1990, p. 108), I believe that community colleges, universities, and many other institutions or agencies involved in the education or training of adults have available personnel capable of becoming successful SGIF facilitators without incurring the cost of the expensive workshops and/or video tapes recommended by Clark (1982, p.4) and others. As an extension of this belief, I believe that the SGIF can be easily adapted to the audioconference medium. While there are important and essential prerequisite skills and qualities that every SGIF facilitator should

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[1]This method is known both as Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) and Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF). I prefer the latter title as it sounds less 'clinical' and also emphasises the single most important aspect of the process -- receiving and acting on feedback from adult learners.

possess, neither the classroom method, nor the proposed audioconference method should be restricted to those individuals who are formally trained by 'experts' in the process. In fact, Kort (1992), in an article discussing a variety of strategies related to faculty development and the learner-centered classroom, noted that "SGIF is the simplest of the activities [she] proposes (p.69)."

Glossary

Before explaining the audioconference SGIF process in detail, it is important to identify and clarify some of the terms used in this guide.

(1) **instructor** refers to the audioconference course professor, teacher, facilitator, trainer, or tutor.
(2) **facilitator** refers to the person conducting the audioconference feedback session with the students.
(3) **student(s)** refers to the adult learners participating at the various sites in an audioconference course.
(4) **classroom** refers to a traditional, four-walled, face-to-face classroom.
(5) **audioconference or audioconferencing** refers to the distance education technology "in which participants in different locations use telephones or audioconferencing equipment (e.g., microphones and convenors [speakers]) to interactively communicate with each other in real time (Willis, 1993, p. 119)."

Conducting an SGIF via audioconference

The five steps introduced by Clark (1982, p. 4) have been adapted to suit an audioconference course.

Step 1 - Preparation

(A) First, the audioconference instructor will seek the services of a facilitator (usually another audioconference instructor) to act as an intermediary in obtaining feedback from the learners. (Pages 11 and 12 of this package provide a list of recommended prerequisite skills for audioconference SGIF facilitators.) Regarding the timing for an SGIF session, most classroom practitioners suggest that the SGIF take place at mid-term (Bennett, 1988, p. 3). However, this time-frame may have been chosen because it was administratively convenient for universities to conduct formative feedback activities close to the mid-term break, and not because it was the most strategic time to conduct a formative

evaluation. I suggest conducting an SGIF one-third of the way into a course would be more productive because the students will have formed opinions on their experiences by this point and such timing would enable the instructor to make relevant changes sooner.

When meeting with the facilitator, the audioconference instructor should provide specific details regarding the number of sites and the number of students at each site. By doing this, the instructor and facilitator can pre-arrange a method for organizing the students into small groups. Further information on the small group formation can be found under Step 2(B) on page 6.

(B) During the initial meeting, the audioconference instructor and the facilitator should discuss and agree on which questions the students will be asked during the SGIF session. For classroom SGIF sessions, most practitioners agree that three questions should be asked (Bennett, 1988; Clark, 1982). However, there is little agreement on what these three questions should be. Below are three sets of questions, each with a different focus implied:

Clark's (1982, p.4) suggested questions for the classroom focus on the course in general:

(1) What do you like about the course?
(2) What do you think needs improvement?
(3) What suggestions do you have for bringing about these improvements?

Bennett's (1988, p.3) suggested questions for a traditional classroom focus on the students' individual learning styles and needs:

(1) What helps you learn?
(2) What does not help?
(3) What do you suggest to improve your learning?

Based on a concern to focus on improving instructional skills and instructor/student interactions, I propose a third set of questions:

(1) What are the instructor's major facilitation/ presentation strengths?
(2) What areas of facilitation/presentation need improvement?
(3) What suggestions do you have for making the improvements noted above?

Because all three sets of questions are valuable in their own right, I suggest the following. That Bennett's three questions on 'learning' not be presented to the students during the SGIF; rather, that these questions, or a revised and more specific form of these questions, be addressed on orientation day by using a one-page questionnaire. For an audioconference course, this questionnaire could be included in the course manual. During orientation in the first class, the audioconference instructor can introduce the form, explain its relevance to the course, and review the instructions in the manual for returning the form to the instructor. As well as including Bennett's suggested questions on learning, the form should also include questions that address the audioconference technology. Three related questions could be: (1) Have you ever taken an audioconference course before? If so, briefly describe your reaction to audioconferencing? (2) What concerns (if any) do have regarding your ability to learn in an audioconference environment? (3) If audioconferencing is new to you, what can I do to help you adjust to the new technology? Appendix 'A' in this package offers an example of an orientation form for an audioconference course.

Addressing the learners' needs and apprehensions are extremely important. Using the recommended questionnaire method would not only demonstrate to the students that the instructor is interested in their individual learning differences and preferences, it would also suggest that the instructor is interested in knowing this information **prior** to engaging the course content. Regarding the six remaining questions (Clark's and my own), I suggest that all six be included in the SGIF, thus feedback on course design and implementation as well as feedback on instructional issues can be received in one session (see Appendix 'B' for a copy of the questions).

(C) During the last audioconference class before the scheduled SGIF session, the instructor should advise the students that a colleague will be using the last 45 minutes of the next class to obtain some feedback. The learners should be advised that the purpose of the feedback session will be to improve the course and the instructor's ability to facilitate audioconference learning. This is consistent with Willis' (1993) recommendation that when conducting "formative evaluation, let students know why you are collecting the information and how it will be used (p. 68)." It should also be emphasised that both the instructor **and** the students will benefit from the session.

Step 2 - Conducting the audioconference SGIF session

(A) On the day of the SGIF session, with about 50 to 55 minutes remaining in the class, the instructor should introduce his or her colleague to the class and then leave the classroom. The facilitator should then explain the process listed below (B, C, & D) to the students. The facilitator should confirm with the students that the instructor has left the room and will therefore be unable to directly hear any of the feedback session. The students should be advised that any individual comments will be anonymous -- the instructor will not be told who initiated any particular comment. The facilitator should also advise the students that the SGIF session will not be used in the instructor's performance evaluation, nor will the results be given to the instructor's supervisor. As a precaution, the facilitator should check with each site to confirm that registered students are the **only** persons within earshot of the upcoming feedback session.

(B) The next part of the process takes advantage of the compatibility between small group structured activities and the audioconference medium noted by distance education practitioners (Burge, 1993, p.222; Schieman, Teare, & McLaren, 1992, p. 54; Willis, 1993, p. 83). First, the students are arranged into small groups and asked to make comments on the six specific questions outlined in appendix 'B.' Fifteen minutes should be allowed for this activity.

In the audioconference setting, students may be able to work as a small group at their own site. A minimum of two persons and a maximum of six persons per site should be manageable. Where there is only one person at a site, arrangements can be made with the teleconference operator to link that site with another site(s) with one or two students. Where there are more than six students at one site, two smaller groups can be formed within the site. The small group arrangements should be discussed with the instructor in the initial meeting so that valuable class time is not wasted by trying to arrange groups into manageable units (see Step 1(A) on pages 3 and 4).

(C) After fifteen minutes have passed, the students will then rejoin as one group and the facilitator will ask a reporter from each group to report on each question. The facilitator will try to obtain a consensus where possible, and to seek clarification where necessary. As Redmond (1982) notes, "the facilitator must also be sensitive to dissension and minority reporting (p. 4)." The facilitator should record the feedback on paper so that he or she has a written record of the responses.

Though the nature of feedback will vary from class to class, a large scale research project (Newby, Sherman, & Coffman, 1991, pp. 4-5) found that most traditional classroom feedback falls into one of seven major categories: Instructor (or Instruction), Learner Interaction, Media, Content, Printed Material, Grading, and Course Policy. In an audioconference course, I suspect that comments regarding the technology will also form a major category. Conducting this part of step 2 in a traditional classroom usually takes 15 to 30 minutes, depending on factors such as class size, the extent of diverse opinions, how much clarifying of the feedback is required, etc.

(D) When recording of the feedback is completed, the facilitator shall advise the learners that he or she will report back to the instructor before the next scheduled audioconference class.

Step 3 - Facilitator and instructor meet to discuss feedback

As soon as practicable, the facilitator should meet with the instructor to discuss the feedback session. The facilitator should provide the instructor with a typed summary of the feedback. The facilitator shall ensure that all comments made by specific students remain anonymous. The facilitator can (and should), however, provide the instructor with a general idea of the level of concern on each issue (e.g., "most of the students felt . . ," "a few students expressed a concern about . . ," "about half of the students . . ," "one site was particularly concerned with . . ." etc.).

The extent of the facilitator/instructor discussion will depend on the relationship between the two parties and the experience of the facilitator as an audioconference instructor. An experienced audioconference facilitator should not only be able to effectively relay the student feedback to the instructor, he or she should also be able to provide suggestions for dealing with issues or concerns arising from the SGIF. One skill required of the facilitator during the instructor/facilitator discussion is sensing whether the instructor is open to suggestions for dealing with concerns arising from the feedback, or whether the instructor prefers to deal with the feedback on his or her own. Kort (1992) notes that one of the benefits of the traditional classroom SGIF is that "instructors can learn from both their colleagues and their students (p. 69)."

Step 4 - Instructor acknowledges receipt of feedback

Though step 3 has been identified as the most difficult one in a traditional classroom (Clark, 1982, p. 4; Redmond, 1982, p.5), I believe that step 4 has the greatest potential for confrontation if not handled properly. While the instructor should address the students at the beginning of the next class and acknowledge the feedback received, he or she must be careful not to reopen the SGIF session. Walking this fine line between **addressing** the feedback and **redressing** the feedback may be difficult.

My perception from using SGIF in the traditional classroom has been that discussion about the feedback should be limited. However, research has indicated that "students were more satisfied with an extended instructor response that went beyond simple acknowledgement of having received student feedback to more directly address[ing] the specific content of the feedback (Abbott, Wulff, Nyquist, Ropp, & Hess, 1990, pp. 204-205)." Clark (1982) offers further support against my position to limit discussion of the feedback; he recommends that the instructor use "10 minutes of the ensuing class period to get clarification from students about comments that were unclear (p. 4)."

I have two points of disagreement with Clark's strategy. First, if the facilitator did a thorough job, there should be no points which remain unclear. One of the primary purposes of having a facilitator (as opposed to using a questionnaire) is to clarify and confirm the nature of the feedback that the instructor will eventually receive. Second, anonymity and a willingness to express concerns to a person other than the instructor are two particular components of the SGIF session that make it successful. Anything that might be perceived by the students as an attempt to reopen or make enquiries regarding specific comments or concerns may serve to undermine the effectiveness of the SGIF process. This is especially true if the instructor becomes defensive about certain feedback.

Ultimately, the decision lies with the instructor regarding the extent that he or she wishes to acknowledge the feedback. As an instructor, my personal preference is to "briefly" acknowledge receipt of the feedback. I do believe, however, that it is very important to outline those things which cannot be changed for the course in question.

Example:

"I met with Mary yesterday and she advised me of the outcome of your feedback session. I appreciate all your comments and I will try to incorporate your feedback. I agree with your suggestion that more time is needed to complete the first assignment. In future courses I will move the deadline from the fourth week to the sixth week."

Step 5 - Follow-up meeting between facilitator and instructor

Though Clark (1982, p.4) defines step 5 as the final step in the SGIF process, Redmond (1982, p.6) acknowledges that this step is seldom performed. I concur with Redmond, as it has been my experience that step 4 usually ends the SGIF. I would, however, recommend a follow-up meeting if the facilitator and/or the instructor believe one to be necessary, or if the instructor has limited experience in an audioconference environment. For an inexperienced audioconference instructor, such a meeting could serve to establish a supportive relationship in which the instructor can freely discuss his or her success in acting upon the feedback received through the SGIF.

An experienced audioconference facilitator may also be able to diagnose why certain attempts to make changes might have been unsuccessful for the instructor. Bennett (1987), on the other hand, totally disagrees with the inclusion of step 5; he believes that "it inappropriately shifts the responsibility for improving instruction from the instructor to the facilitator (p. 103)." In light of the disagreement among practitioners, the decision on whether on not to include step 5 should lie with the instructor and the facilitator.

The benefits of SGIF when compared to using questionnaires

It is difficult to separate the benefits of SGIF for instructors from the benefits of SGIF for learners, as most feedback that helps instructors also helps learners. Following is a list of benefits I have noted, as well as some benefits noted by others.

NOTE - while the following benefits are specific to observations or research from SGIF sessions conducted in face-to-face classrooms, I have no reason to believe that these benefits would not also be relevant in an audioconference environment.

(1) An SGIF facilitator can seek elaboration or clarification of feedback points prior to reporting to the instructor. When an anonymous questionnaire is used, comments that require clarification can not be redressed.

(2) The presence of a third party to solicit feedback emphasises to the learners that their input is indeed valued by the instructor.

(3) In my experience, learners are sometimes reluctant to provide direct or indirect (e.g., through a questionnaire) feedback to the same instructor who will eventually grade them. Consequently, feedback tends to be more plentiful and candid when an intermediary is used. On a related point, confidentiality and anonymity of the SGIF method tends to illicit more constructive feedback. In short, if the students have serious concerns, you are more likely to hear about them through an SGIF session than through mid-course surveys.

(4) Most adult learners know that there is nothing "**anonymous**" about an anonymous survey! Anonymity is especially jeopardized in small classes. However, when the SGIF method is used, true anonymity can be achieved. (In and audioconference course, where the number of students at each site can sometimes be small, anonymity or perceived anonymity is particularly jeopardized when using mid-course questionnaires.)

(5) The SGIF facilitator, as a neutral party, is often in a better position than the students to relay valid points of constructive feedback to the instructor. It is an unfortunate truth that some (not all) instructors place a higher value on feedback relayed through a peer than on feedback received from students directly.

(6) The SGIF experience can positively affect students. According to Redmond (1982), a survey of SGIF participants found "a significant positive change in student attitude towards the instructor, attitude towards the course, overall morale, and student motivation (p. 7)."

(7) Bennett (1988) provides three incidental benefits for the students arising from using the SGIF method: "(1) Students enjoy being consulted. (2) The process catapults them into active participation in their own education -- for the first time in some instances. (3) Most importantly, students enjoy thinking together seriously (p. 4)."

(8) Weimer (1990) notes that SGIF sessions "help students develop the kind of instructional awareness that will enable them to understand experiences in other classes better and help them learn to express criticisms of teaching constructively (pp. 107-108)."

(9) One of the best reasons for conducting SGIF sessions may simply be because students prefer it. Wulff, Staton-Spicer, Hess, and Nyquist (1985) note that "students prefer the SGIF over end-of-quarter student ratings because of the timing, quality of feedback, oral exchange of information and personal exchange involved in the SGIF (p. 43)."

Arranging an SGIF session for your next audioconference course

If this package has peaked your interest regarding the possible benefits of the SGIF method in an audioconference environment, then the best way to gain a better understanding of the process and its usefulness is by first experiencing the method from the perspective of an instructor. If you cannot find a colleague with experience in audioconference instruction and experience using the SGIF method in the traditional classroom, then I suggest you consider reviewing this package with a knowledgeable, experienced, and respected audioconference instructor to see if he or she is willing to conduct an SGIF session for your class.

Would you like to facilitate audioconference SGIF sessions?

If you are considering becoming an audioconference SGIF facilitator for one or more of your colleagues, you should first experience the process as an instructor. Though you will not get to experience the student feedback session from this perspective, you will come to appreciate the value of the facilitator/instructor pre and post-feedback sessions (Steps 1 and 3). You will also be able gain an understanding of the variety of feedback that emerges from SGIF sessions.

If, after experiencing the SGIF process as an audioconference instructor, you feel that you would like to facilitate audioconference SGIF sessions, you should have prerequisite knowledge and experience in at least three areas specifically related to **audioconference facilitation:** (1) effective instructional techniques and strategies for facilitating adult learning, including a clear understanding of the complexities, shortcomings, and benefits of learning and facilitating in an audioconference environment; (2) giving, receiving, and soliciting feedback in audioconference courses; and (3) working effectively with small groups in audioconference courses.

As feedback is at the core of the SGIF process, it is understandable that every facilitator have extensive experience and a clear understanding of the accepted practices related to giving, receiving, and soliciting feedback in an adult learning environment, especially in audioconference courses. Regarding skills related to facilitating feedback sessions, it has been my experience that many persons with training in counselling or social work are especially skilful and sensitive in this area.

The audioconference SGIF facilitator should also have experience working in small groups (or buzz groups), particularity in situations where the groups examined issues, addressed questions, or attempted to solve a problem. Having worked with small groups, the audioconference facilitator will no doubt have experienced dealing with dominant sites, dominant individuals within a site, and will have noticed the tendency for more assertive individuals to occasionally sway group opinion. Seeking clarification within a group or site, or asking for a rotation of group reporters, are both effective ways of bringing out the feedback of less assertive individuals and ensuring maximum participation for all the students.

Knowledge of effective instructional techniques and knowledge of the various theories and practices related to facilitating adult learning in an audioconference environment are also important prerequisites for an audioconference SGIF facilitator. These skills are especially needed when the facilitator is working with new or inexperienced audioconference instructors, as in these cases the instructor will often look to the facilitator for guidance and suggestions regarding what action to take in light of the feedback received.

When the students report on instructional, learning, or distance technology issues, a knowledgeable and experienced audioconference facilitator should be able to ask the kind of probing questions that will turn general feedback into specific feedback, and vague comments into concrete observations. Abbott, Wulff, Nyquist, Ropp, & Hess (1990) explain the role of the face-to-face classroom SGIF facilitator concisely: "the facilitator collects and summarizes the groups' ideas, clarifying until the groups are satisfied that the facilitator clearly understands the information being reported (p. 201)." So, before completing the feedback session with the students, the facilitator should be confident that he or she will be able to clearly and correctly articulate the feedback to the instructor.

Reflection on your skills in the three key areas previously identified will give you some sense of whether you have the knowledge and experience to conduct audioconference SGIF sessions. If you currently have the skills and background, but would like to refresh your knowledge in the key areas prior to conducting an audioconference SGIF session, there are many books and journal articles available that cover giving and receiving feedback, working with small groups, and teaching and learning in an audioconference environment.

Concluding remarks

It is my hope that the SGIF process has been presented in a user-friendly manner. One of my goals was to address the components of SGIF individually. I wanted to demonstrate that the SGIF session in itself is not really a **new** method or technique; rather, that it is a **process** involving a sequence of methods or techniques -- many of which you may already be skilled in. I hoped that by viewing the SGIF from this perspective you would feel capable of using the process without the formal training recommended by Clark (1982) and others. Also, by breaking the SGIF into sperate components, it is hoped that its potential for use in an audioconference environment has become evident.

After reading Bennett's (1987) article, it is clear that practitioners have taken it upon themselves to revise Clark's original process in an effort to suit their particular needs in the traditional classroom. So, adapting the SGIF to suit an audioconference medium hardly seems inappropriate. It has also become evident that there are opposing viewpoints among practitioners -- particularly between Clark and Bennett -- regarding some steps in the classroom SGIF process. Along with my own suggestions and recommendations, I have attempted to present a fair balance of these opposing viewpoints so that you can decide which approaches are consistent with your own views, experiences, and practices. In closing, I encourage you to make note of what works for you as a audioconference facilitator and/or instructor and to tailor the SGIF process to suit your needs.

Sample Orientation Questionnaire Appendix 'A'

AUDIOCONFERENCE ORIENTATION QUESTIONNAIRE

INSTRUCTOR _____

STUDENT _____

COURSE OR CLASS _____

(1) In general, what helps you learn?

(2) What does not help or hinders you ability to learn?

(3) What can I do to make it easier for you to learn in this course?

(4) Have you ever taken an audioconference course before? If so, briefly describe your reaction to audioconferencing.

(5) What concerns (if any) do have regarding your ability to learn in an audioconference environment?

(6) If audioconferencing is new to you, what can I do to help you adjust to the new technology?

Sample SGIF form Appendix 'B'

SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTIONAL FEEDBACK (SGIF)
INSTRUCTOR _____ FACILITATOR _____ COURSE OR CLASS _____
(1) What do you like about the course? (2) What do you think needs improvement? (3) What suggestions do you have for bringing about these improvements? (4) What are the instructor's major facilitation/ presentation strengths? (5) What areas of facilitation/presentation need improvement? (6) What suggestions do you have for making the improvements noted above?

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